



Course report 2024

Higher Psychology

This report provides information on candidates' performance. Teachers, lecturers and assessors may find it useful when preparing candidates for future assessment. The report is intended to be constructive and informative, and to promote better understanding. You should read the report with the published assessment documents and marking instructions.

We compiled the statistics in this report before we completed the 2024 appeals process.

Grade boundary and statistical information

Statistical information: update on courses

Number of resulted entries in 2023: 2,932

Number of resulted entries in 2024: 2,494

Statistical information: performance of candidates

Distribution of course awards including minimum mark to achieve each grade

A	Number of candidates	539	Percentage	21.6	Cumulative percentage	21.6	Minimum mark required	84
B	Number of candidates	624	Percentage	25.0	Cumulative percentage	46.6	Minimum mark required	70
C	Number of candidates	569	Percentage	22.8	Cumulative percentage	69.4	Minimum mark required	57
D	Number of candidates	437	Percentage	17.5	Cumulative percentage	87.0	Minimum mark required	43
No award	Number of candidates	325	Percentage	13.0	Cumulative percentage	100	Minimum mark required	N/A

We have not applied rounding to these statistics.

You can read the general commentary on grade boundaries in the appendix.

In this report:

- ◆ 'most' means greater than 70%
- ◆ 'many' means 50% to 69%
- ◆ 'some' means 25% to 49%
- ◆ 'a few' means less than 25%

You can find statistical reports on the [statistics and information](#) page of our website.

Section 1: comments on the assessment

The question paper sampled content from three topics: the two mandatory topics of sleep and dreams, and conformity and obedience, plus one optional topic. Candidates answered one question from the topics of depression, memory, stress, prejudice, social relationships and aggression. Candidates answered 20 marks' worth of content on each topic, enabling them to demonstrate their skills of description, explanation, evaluation, application and analysis.

The modifications put in place by SQA to reduce the impact of COVID-19 on candidate performance of the assignment were removed. This meant the assignment task returned to pre-COVID-19 requirements.

Question paper

Overall, the question paper performed as expected. Feedback from the marking team, teachers and lecturers indicated that there was more differentiation in this paper in comparison to previous papers. This provided a balanced paper that enabled candidates to achieve marks and showcase their knowledge and skills.

The question paper assessed the skill of application in a new way in question 2(c) without the use of a scenario. This enabled candidates to apply their knowledge of obedience in a real-life situation.

The skill of analysis was also assessed in a slightly different way in the second question in each of the optional topics, with candidates asked to analyse one aspect of their optional topic and include a further aspect of their optional topic within their analysis. This question did prove to be more demanding than expected because of the unfamiliar approach, and the grade boundary was adjusted to reflect that candidates at the lower end of the mark range found this question more challenging than those at the top end of the mark range.

The aim of introducing new approaches to assessing skills was to both reduce the predictability of the question paper and provide opportunities for differentiation while still enabling candidates to demonstrate a range of skills.

The topic of memory was the most commonly answered optional topic, and the topics of social relationships and aggression were least commonly answered. Across the different optional topics, the number of marks gained by candidates was consistent, with only minor variations.

Assignment

The assignment performed as expected, with a small increase in mean marks awarded. Feedback from the marking team, lecturers and teachers suggested it was appropriately demanding.

The marking of unethical research continued in line with the change made in 2023. Marks were deducted from the design and procedure of the method section for candidates who conducted unethical research rather than in the ethics section of the method. Candidates

were therefore able to be credited for theoretical knowledge of ethics despite issues with the practical set-up of their assignment.

There was a small increase in ethical breaches where candidates carried out unethical research. Centres must ensure that candidates follow the British Psychological Society (BPS) ethical guidelines when conducting their assignments.

Section 2: comments on candidate performance

Question paper

Section 1: Individual behaviour — sleep and dreams

Question 1(a)

Candidates were asked to explain non-REM sleep. Most candidates achieved half marks or more, providing some points of explanation regarding non-REM sleep.

Question 1(b)

Candidates were asked to evaluate the Czeisler study of sleep and dreams. Many candidates achieved full marks for this question, demonstrating their evaluative skills by providing developed evaluative points for this study. It was noted that a few candidates evaluated the Dement and Kleitman study, which is the other mandatory study in the topic of sleep and dreams.

Question 1(c)

Candidates were asked to apply their understanding of the impact of information processing and reorganisational theory on sleep in an unseen scenario. Many candidates were able to access the theoretical marks available for this question, providing knowledge of information processing and reorganisational theory. A few candidates applied this knowledge to the scenario, however, many candidates seemed to find this question challenging. Application to the scenario tended to be repetitive and vague.

Section 2 — Social behaviour — conformity and obedience

Question 2(a)

Candidates were asked to explain informational social influence. Many candidates provided explanatory points about this factor, achieving 2 or more marks. Candidates explained what informational social influence is, related this type of social influence to a type of conformity and gave an appropriate example.

Question 2(b)

Candidates were asked to analyse the Mori and Arai study of conformity. Most candidates described and evaluated this study, and some provided some analytical points on it.

Question 2(c)

This was a new format of question, enabling candidates to apply their knowledge of obedience to a real-life situation (wearing masks during the COVID-19 pandemic when ordered). Most candidates showed their knowledge of obedience and understanding of the way that uniforms and perceived legitimate authority have an impact on obedience in real life, and so achieved 3 or more marks for this question.

Section 3 — optional topic

Questions 3 to 8 part (a)

Candidates were asked to describe one aspect of their optional topic. For example, for stress, candidates were asked to describe what is meant by hardiness. Many candidates demonstrated their knowledge of this part of their optional topic and provided at least two points of description in their response. For the topics of memory, stress and aggression, many candidates achieved half marks or more. For the topics of depression, prejudice and social relationships, most candidates achieved half marks or more.

Questions 3 to 8 part (b)

Candidates were asked to analyse one aspect of their optional topic and include a different aspect of their optional topic in their analysis. For example, for stress, candidates were asked to analyse the general adaptation syndrome and include at least one coping strategy in their analysis. This question enabled candidates to show breadth and depth of knowledge of their optional topic. In any analyse question, candidates can access half marks for description and evaluation, and these marks were available for the first aspect of the optional topic in the question, for example, for the general adaptation syndrome in stress. Most candidates accessed some descriptive and evaluative marks for their optional topic, however, a few candidates did not describe and/or evaluate in their response. Full marks were available to candidates who solely made analytical points.

Candidates seemed to find this question challenging, with a few candidates responding to only one component of the question. These candidates were, therefore, unable to access all the marks for this question. A few candidates demonstrated detailed knowledge of their chosen optional topic, however, did not demonstrate the skill of analysis, which meant that they could only access the marks available for description and evaluation. Some candidates provided relevant analytical points, and these candidates achieved higher marks.

Assignment

Introduction

Candidates must describe background theory and research relevant to their research. Many candidates provided a detailed theoretical background and described two research studies relevant to their primary research. This section attracted the highest mean mark of the assignment.

Introduction — aim and hypotheses

Candidates must provide an aim that relates to their background research and an operationalised hypothesis. Some candidates provided a relevant aim and some candidates wrote a fully operationalised research hypothesis. Many candidates did not provide a sufficiently operationalised hypothesis to be awarded the hypothesis mark in this section of the assignment. Candidates completing a correlational study sometimes provided a causal hypothesis. This was inappropriate as correlational hypotheses should be written in terms of relationships or links between co-variables.

Method

In the method section, candidates must identify their method and justify why they have chosen this method, identify the design (where appropriate), research variables, extraneous and/or confounding variables, sampling method, and participants. Candidates are also required to describe their procedure and identify their materials.

Most candidates identified the method chosen for their research and the research design, however, some did not justify their use of research method. Many candidates identified their research variables, although a few candidates did not give the conditions of their independent variable (where appropriate). Many candidates described their sample and correctly identified their chosen sampling method. A few candidates described their procedure in sufficient detail to permit replication.

Method — ethics

Candidates must explain how they implemented BPS ethical guidelines and avoided ethical breaches. Many candidates provided some generic points on ethical guidelines and procedures, showing an overall knowledge of ethics in psychological research. Some candidates applied the implementation of ethical guidelines specifically to their own research and explained the way they had avoided ethical breaches.

Marks for the method section were impacted if candidates completed unethical research. Those that did so could not receive the mark for their procedure and the mark for the justification for their research.

The ethical breaches identified in 2024 included the following:

Deception

A number of candidates completed unethical conformity experiments involving replications of Jenness or Asch style experiments. Candidates created experiments that deceived participants by using confederates or group discussion in a situation of overt social pressure.

Protection of participants

A number of candidates conducted research that potentially put their participants at risk of physical or psychological harm, discomfort, or stress. Candidates across a range of centres conducted research involving the following:

- ◆ Jenness or Asch style replications.
- ◆ Manipulating participants' pre-sleep routine, for example, exposing participants to blue light before sleep or changing their caffeine consumption (including asking participants to consume caffeine before going to sleep).
- ◆ Depriving participants of sleep in some way.
- ◆ Using impossible or difficult maths problems during testing.
- ◆ Approaching strangers to act as participants. Ethical guidelines protect candidates as well as participants and obtaining participants in this way puts candidates at risk.

- ◆ Using participants who are under 16 years of age. It is clearly stated in the course assessment task that participants under the age of 16 must not be used.
- ◆ Blindfolding participants during the procedure.

Of particular concern was the number of questionnaires asking invasive and inappropriate questions. These included questions on the following: low mood or depression, anxiety levels, medical conditions and/or history, medications, drug and alcohol consumption, learning difficulties, whether participants have sleep disorders and/or if they are on medication that affects their sleep, and questions on self-esteem levels in groups where there are already potentially low levels of self-esteem.

Confidentiality or data breach

A few candidates included certain details about their centre or class group that would allow their participants to be identified, which is a breach of confidentiality. This occurred both in section C of the report and in the appendices to the report. There were also a few candidates who included personal details on information given to participants, for example, a mobile phone number or personal email address on the debrief. This is a safeguarding issue for candidates, and as stated before, ethical guidelines protect candidates as well as participants. A few candidates asked participants for their date of birth on their consent form. While it is recognised that candidates believe this ensures participants are the appropriate age for participation in research, including this information in the final report, potentially combined with a printed name and signature, constitutes a breach of data protection guidelines and is therefore considered unethical.

Results

Here, candidates must choose appropriate statistical procedures to describe their data and justify that choice, present data in appropriate formats, and label these appropriately. They are also required to carry out accurate calculations, include these in the appendices and relate their findings to their hypothesis accurately.

Most candidates chose appropriate statistical procedures to describe their data, however, many could not justify their use. Many candidates presented their data in an appropriate format, however, some candidates did not label these in sufficient detail to enable interpretation (for example, vague titles, missing axes labels). A few candidates did not include calculations in their appendices. Many candidates did provide an accurate statement of whether their results supported or refuted their hypothesis. Candidates who completed research using a correlational design sometimes became confused when writing this section of their assignment and did not choose appropriate measures to describe or present their data.

Discussion — analysis

In this section of the assignment, candidates must analyse their results. Many candidates provided four or more analytical points relating to their results. These points tended to include how their results confirmed or refuted their hypotheses, the way in which the results related to psychological theories and research in their introductions, and real-life applications of the research. A few candidates provided an appropriate concluding statement, however, this was often not sufficiently detailed to be awarded marks. Many candidates attempted to

explain the influence of variables on their results but did not give details on the specific way their results were impacted. Some candidates provided a comparison between their own research and the research studies they provided in their introduction section of the assignment, however, these comparisons focused on the method, sample and/or procedure rather than results, and so did not attract marks.

Discussion — evaluation

Candidates are required to evaluate their primary research in this section of the assignment. Most candidates provided at least two developed evaluative points and some gave four fully developed evaluative points relating to their procedure, sample and/or research method.

Presentation and style

Candidates must provide references in a format that enables the information to be located by a third party, and present their research in the style and format of a formal psychology report.

Some candidates fulfilled these requirements and so were awarded the full 2 marks. A few candidates included their references at the very end of their assignment, which is not in the style and format of a psychology report.

Section 3: preparing candidates for future assessment

Question paper

Candidates are expected to have full knowledge from the course content for each topic as identified in the course specification. The course specification is available on the [Higher Psychology subject page on SQA's website](#).

Centres should continue to develop the skills required by the course, with particular focus on the higher-order skills of application and analysis. We remind centres that candidates can be required to analyse sets of processes, theories and explanations as well as research studies, and should be prepared to do this. Guidance on how to do this is given in the appendix of the course specification, and in an [SQA Academy course](#). Centres may find past papers useful to support candidates in developing these skills. These are available from the [past papers section of SQA's website](#).

The [Understanding Standards site](#) contains examples of candidate evidence and detailed commentaries about mark allocations.

The majority of candidates studying Higher Psychology are new to the subject. As the subject contains highly abstract content at this level, we encourage centres to carefully consider the ability of potential candidates when putting them forward for this course.

Assignment

Centres should ensure that candidates are aware of the requirements of the assignment. A guide for centres and candidates is available from the [Higher Psychology subject page on SQA's website](#).

Candidates would benefit from support and guidance to enable them to provide hypotheses that are fully operationalised. As research is designed around the hypothesis, an improved understanding as evidenced by appropriate hypotheses would also support candidates towards making decisions about the method they use.

Centre guidance on the development of the skills of 'justifying' and 'applying' their choice of method and descriptive statistics would also be beneficial for candidates.

Candidates should use appropriate terminology and avoid terms such as 'prove', 'statistical significance' (unless inferential statistics have been calculated) and 'relationship' (unless correlational research designs have been used). Candidates should also write in the third person as the report is an objective account of their research process.

Ethical research procedures are essential, and candidates should think carefully about the impact of their research on participants. Centres should support candidates to ensure that they adhere to the [British Psychological Society \(BPS\) ethical guidelines](#) when planning and conducting their research.

Further guidance on ethical procedures is available in the course support notes in the course specification, available on the [Higher Psychology subject page on SQA's website](#), and in the Guide to Ethics for Teachers and Students of Psychology at Pre-Degree Level from the [Association for the Teaching of Psychology \(ATP\)](#).

SQA's [Understanding Standards site](#) has examples of candidate assignments with detailed commentaries on marks awarded, which teachers and lecturers can use to support candidates towards success in their research assignment.

Appendix: general commentary on grade boundaries

SQA's main aim when setting grade boundaries is to be fair to candidates across all subjects and levels and maintain comparable standards across the years, even as arrangements evolve and change.

For most National Courses, SQA aims to set examinations and other external assessments and create marking instructions that allow:

- ◆ a competent candidate to score a minimum of 50% of the available marks (the notional grade C boundary)
- ◆ a well-prepared, very competent candidate to score at least 70% of the available marks (the notional grade A boundary)

It is very challenging to get the standard on target every year, in every subject, at every level. Therefore, SQA holds a grade boundary meeting for each course to bring together all the information available (statistical and qualitative) and to make final decisions on grade boundaries based on this information. Members of SQA's Executive Management Team normally chair these meetings.

Principal assessors utilise their subject expertise to evaluate the performance of the assessment and propose suitable grade boundaries based on the full range of evidence. SQA can adjust the grade boundaries as a result of the discussion at these meetings. This allows the pass rate to be unaffected in circumstances where there is evidence that the question paper or other assessment has been more, or less, difficult than usual.

- ◆ The grade boundaries can be adjusted downwards if there is evidence that the question paper or other assessment has been more difficult than usual.
- ◆ The grade boundaries can be adjusted upwards if there is evidence that the question paper or other assessment has been less difficult than usual.
- ◆ Where levels of difficulty are comparable to previous years, similar grade boundaries are maintained.

Every year, we evaluate the performance of our assessments in a fair way, while ensuring standards are maintained so that our qualifications remain credible. To do this, we measure evidence of candidates' knowledge and skills against the national standard.

During the pandemic, we modified National Qualifications course assessments, for example we removed elements of coursework. We kept these modifications in place until the 2022–23 session. The education community agreed that retaining the modifications for longer than this could have a detrimental impact on learning and progression to the next stage of education, employment or training. After discussions with candidates, teachers, lecturers, parents, carers and others, we returned to full course assessment for the 2023–24 session.

SQA's approach to awarding was announced in [March 2024](#) and explained that any impact on candidates completing coursework for the first time, as part of their SQA assessments, would be considered in our grading decisions and incorporated into our well-established

grading processes. This provides fairness and safeguards for candidates and helps to provide assurances across the wider education community as we return to established awarding.

Our approach to awarding is broadly aligned to other nations of the UK that have returned to normal grading arrangements.

For full details of the approach, please refer to the [National Qualifications 2024 Awarding — Methodology Report](#).